Case Study – Singapore

Singapore - Country Overview

Singapore is a sovereign city-state, located in Southeast Asia. It consists of one principal island with a further 62 islets. It has a population of around 5.6 million and is 278.6 square miles in area. To the north lies the Malay Peninsula and to the south, Indonesia. Singapore won its independence from the United Kingdom in 1963, when it joined Malaysia, but ceded from there to become an independent nation in 1965.

Singapore is the highest-performing country according to its 2015 PISA results (OECD 2015). This includes overall performance in science, reading and mathematics, as well as in collaborative problem solving (OECD 2018b).

Singapore introduced a number of education policies from 1997 onwards to provide Singaporean students ‘with knowledge and skills required for a globalised economy and workforce as well as better prepare them for the challenges of the 21st century’ (Chew 2016, p. 165). Central to these changes was workforce reform: Chew (2016) explains how ‘stringent criteria were used to select suitably qualified applicants who went through intensive pre-service teacher training at Singapore’s sole teacher training institute [the National Institute of Education, or NIE]’ (p. 166). 15% of secondary teachers now hold at least a Master’s degree (Chew 2016). Nevertheless, Wise (2016) notes that not all Singapore’s PISA success can be attributed to these reforms: ‘60% of high school, and 80% of primary school age students receive private tuition’ (unpaged). Singapore is notable in having developed a highly structured set of three career pathways for education professionals: the teaching, leadership and senior specialist tracks.

Singapore - Professional Development

Chew (2016) identifies how the Singaporean state has ‘invested heavily in building up the teaching force and enhancing its quality’ (p. 166). There is consequently a range of professional-development routes available to teachers, consisting in ‘workshops and short courses … conference and seminar attendance… and industry attachments and sabbaticals’ (p. 168). The purposes of these, according to Chew, is ‘for teachers to upgrade their knowledge, keep abreast of developments and initiatives in education, receive updates on pedagogical innovations, gain new competencies in response to societal needs and demands, gain training in research and management skills, and enhance their teaching effectiveness through a commitment to life-long learning’ (p. 168). The creation and support of the Academy of Singapore Teachers is argued by Chew (2016) to be key to the provision of these professional-development programmes and activities. Established in 2010 ‘to build a teacher-led culture of professional excellence for the teaching fraternity’ (MOE, in Chew 2016, p. 168), it has largely succeeded in creating learning communities where:

Teachers participate in subject groups called subject chapters; each chapter is led by a core team of school teachers recognized as among the best in their subject or by specialists from the Ministry of Education and NIE. The role of these leaders is to enhance teachers’ curriculum knowledge, pedagogical skills and assessment literacy. (Chew 2016, p. 168)

Through the Academy of Singapore Teachers, the Ministry of Education offers professional-development programmes within each of the distinct career tracks it provides for teachers (2018a). For instance, those in the teaching track undertake the Teacher Leaders Programme (Academy of Singapore Teachers 2018b). This programme has three levels: the first is for Senior Teachers, the second for Lead Teachers and the third for Master Teachers (see Figure 2). Teachers must complete that level if further progress within that track is desired.

The Singaporean state also offers a number of professional development ‘opportunities’ for school leaders at all stages on the leadership track (see e.g. National Institute of Education Singapore 2013, 2018). Some of these will be discussed in more detail in the section below, on “leadership career progression”, since professional development in Singapore is closely tied to career progression.
As noted by Chew (2016), the Ministry of Education also offers significant opportunities that are available on all three tracks. Key examples include a Postgraduate Scholarship/Award and one of the Professional Development Packages (Singapore Government Ministry of Education 2018a). This latter might consist either of study leave (sabbaticals) or study loans. All these examples are intended to facilitate in-service postgraduate (i.e. Master’s or Doctoral) study at a university in Singapore or abroad.

Importantly, Yang (2018, unpaged) draws attention to how ‘Singapore teachers assuming appointments on the career tracks are not left to their own devices to search for, and sign up for appropriate PD [professional development] initiatives and programs, but join an ever-growing fraternity of experienced peers and alumni in a carefully-planned, comprehensive suite of programs.’

**Singapore - Teachers’ Career Pathways**

Singapore has a comprehensive, three-pathway career structure composed of discrete ‘tracks’ for teachers. Figure 2 sets these out below:

![Career Tracks for Singapore Teachers](image)

**Figure 2: Career Tracks for Singapore Teachers. Source: Singapore Ministry of Education (2018b)**

As Figure 2 shows, there are four levels within the teaching track, eight within the leadership track and five within the senior specialist track. The Singapore Ministry of Education (2018a) states that selection of track is the teacher’s, and goes on to describe the characteristics associated with each one:

- **Teaching track:** for those who wish to ‘further develop the pedagogical capability of the teaching force’.
- **Leadership track:** for those desiring ‘leadership positions in schools and the Ministry’s headquarters’.
- **Senior Specialist track:** for those ‘inclined towards more specialised areas where deep knowledge and skills are essential for breaking new ground in educational developments’ (2018a, unpaged).

Yang (2018), a practising teacher in Singapore, writes a first-hand account of how he negotiated a change in career track, exemplifying how lateral movements are possible for teachers ‘as long as they satisfy the standards and criteria of the job/career track they aspire to take on’ (Singapore Government Ministry of Education 2018b, unpaged). Yang’s (2018) account is also instructive.
concerning the evidence that must be generated in order to move up a level, in his case to Senior Teacher. He created a professional portfolio containing a statement of his teaching philosophy, evidence of having completed professional-development programmes and short courses, and of having attained accreditation standards. He also undertook ‘multiple cycles of reflection and honing of [his] craft’ (2018, unpaged website) and finally an interview.

**Singapore - Leaders’ Career Pathways**

School leaders’ career progression is catered for through one of the three career tracks available (see Figure 2). Progression here as on other tracks is through successful completion of a number of elements, including interviews, performance appraisal and, importantly, professional-development programmes. The selectivity of this process is made clear by Yang (2018) in his account of his experiences on this track:

Teachers [on the leadership track] are assessed annually for performance and leadership potential, and those thought to have leadership potential are offered opportunities and appointments to gain leadership experiences and professional development appropriate for their portfolios. (Yang 2018, unpaged)

The track seeks to develop leadership in ways that are relevant and accessible to professionals both in schools and in the Ministry, reflecting the status of both (and teachers) as civil servants and effectively, state ‘officers’ who are deployed to, rather than applying for posts.

Exemplifying the Singaporean state’s offer on the leadership track is its flagship “Leaders in Education Programme (LEP)” (2018), offered through the National Institute of Education Singapore. The relationship between the NIE and the state is characterised by Chew (2016) as ‘close collaboration’, constituting along with schools a ‘unique tripartite partnership’ (p. 166). Foreign (fee-paying) applicants to the programme are welcomed, attracted according to the Singapore Ministry of Education by Singapore’s status ‘not only as the hub of educational achievement in South East Asia but also as a leader in educational advancement on the world stage’ (National Institute of Education Singapore 2018, unpaged).

The primary recipients of this offer, however, are ‘specially selected vice-principals and ministry officers in Singapore … [with] a track record of good potential and performance appraisal and [who] have successfully passed a series of situational tests and selection interviews conducted by the MOE’ (National Institute of Education Singapore 2013, p. 2). In other words, these are ‘officers’ on the leadership track who have reached at least vice-principal level and wish to progress to become principal.

The programme is full time and of six-months’ duration, and so participants leave their school to undertake it: they will be posted elsewhere following graduation. The programme ‘aims to develop principalship capability that is values-based, purposeful, innovative and forward-looking, anchored on strong people leadership, strategic management skills and an appreciation of how principals could work effectively in a complex environment’ (ibid.).

To achieve this, it has synthesised contributions from Sergiovanni (2009) and Gardner (2006) into its bespoke and ‘innovative 5R5M (Five Roles and Five Minds) framework of school leadership development’ (ibid.). The ‘Five Roles’ supplied by Sergiovanni (2009) are Educational, Technical, Human, Symbolic, and Cultural; and the ‘Five Minds’ from Gardner (2006) are Ethical, Respectful, Creating, Synthesising and Disciplined. The programme also involves partnership with a local school, mentorship with its principal, an implementation project, a learning journal, an international visit and finally, what are called Management Dialogue Sessions. These are held with senior government officials and are designed to ‘help participants develop an instinctive appreciation of how his/her actions and decisions in the school should be aligned with the fundamental organising principles of Singapore and the MOE (Ministry of Education)’ (National Institute of Education Singapore 2013, p. 5).
The state also offers leadership programmes to those working at a lower level in the leadership track. For example, the Management and Leadership in Schools (MLS) Programme ‘aims to develop innovative middle leaders in schools who can support their principals in school reform’ (National Institute of Education Singapore 2013, p. 6).